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ABSTRACT

The life and contributions of Helen Thompson Woolley and Leta Stetter Hollingworth are presented. These two women were prominent in the early mental testing movement as well as leaders in clinical psychology. Woolley and Hollingworth were feminists whose careful and objective research frequently studied alleged psychological differences between the genders. Both were deliberately concerned with dispelling cultural myths surrounding women, and succeeded in demonstrating that psychological data do not confirm hypotheses concerning gender differences. (Author/GK)

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Leta Stetter Hollingworth and Helen Thompson Woolley: Two mental testers test myths surrounding women

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Abstract

The life and contributions of Helen Thompson Woolley and Leta Stetter Hollingworth are presented. Two women prominent in the early mental testing movement as well as leaders in clinical psychology, Woolley and Hollingworth were feminists whose careful and objective research frequently studied alleged psychological differences between the genders. Both of them were deliberately concerned with the dispelling of cultural myths surrounding women and both succeeded in demonstrating that psychological data do not confirm hypotheses concerning gender differences.

It is characteristic of American social revolutions that they are accompanied by significant modifications of attitudes. Because this is preeminently a nation of laws, change is most often achieved by partisan "movements" that influence the consciousness of lawmakers. In the past fifty years, social progress has increasingly involved the deliberate challenge of those ideas, values, norms, cultural myths, and stereotypes which support the status quo. Borrowing a term from "pop" sociology, we might describe this process of disestablishment as one of "demythologizing." In the area psychology has called the "women question," with its emphasis on myths related to inherent gender differences, challenges to myths surrounding women have frequently been made by women, particularly the mental testers (Shields, 1975a; Stevens, 1980).

As social scientists, we have learned to become aware of stereotypes and cultural myths and have become very sensitive to their expression, even in subtle ways, because we understand that they lead to pernicious discrimination and may contribute to the denigration of an entire class of people. We who are part of the current women's movement are rightfully zealous in our demythologizing of widely-held, irrational views of women - with as much zeal as the myths about blacks and homosexuals were challenged

in the sixties. Most of us, however, do not appreciate how long the history of demythologizing of misogynist views has been in psychology.

Prominent among the many feminist thinkers in the "early days" of our science were two courageous and competent women, who excelled, not merely because they were articulate in presenting common-sense arguments against cultural myths, but because they also conducted important and convincing research on gender differences, research studies deliberately designed to demolish cultural myths (Stevens and Gardner, 1981).

Helen Thompson Woolley (1874-1947) and Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1886-1939), two women important in the early mental testing movement as well as leaders in the field of clinical psychology, as it had developed to that time, were ardent feminists, competent researchers, educators, and humanitarians. Although in many respects very different from each other, both women experienced in their personal lives considerable difficulty in resolving the conflict between family and career as typically manifested by their generation of women of psychology (Stevens and Gardner, 1981).

Helen Thompson Woolley

> ...There is perhaps no field aspiring to be scientific where flagrant personal bias, logic martyred in the cause of supporting a prejudice, unfounded assertions, and even sentimental rot and drivel, have run riot to such an extent as

> here...[However] the signs in the literature of greater moderation in tone and more respect for evidence are in the direction of a much needed reform. .there seems to be a general trend toward the opinion that mind is probably not a secondary sexual character - in other words that there are probably few if any psychological differences of sex which are of biological origin - a statement which I think holds true...
>
> Helen Thompson Woolley (1910, pp340-341)

Woolley was a tragic figure in the early years of American psychology. Before she was thirty years old, she was an accepted expert in both the psychology of individual differences and physiological psychology and was a full professor and the Director of the Psychological Laboratory at Mt. Holyoke. For the next thirty years, Woolley became the consummate mental tester, co-author, for example, of the Merrill-Palmer Scales, and a prominent and powerful figure in the area of clinical child psychology. Before she turned sixty, however, her professional career ended and she "just wasted away" (Zapoleon and Meek, 1974).

The daughter of a shoe manufacturer, Helen Thompson Bradford was born and bred in Chicago. In 1897 she received the Ph.B in philosophy and neurology from the University of Chicago. She studied under J.R. Angell at the same school, receiving her Ph.D., summa cum laude, for her research on the psychological differences between men and women (American Women; Zapoleon and Stolz, 1974). In 1903 her school published her work as two books (Murchison , 1935).

After four years on the faculty of Mt. Holyoke College, she spent one year working as a clinical psychologist with the Board of Education, Phillipine Islands. While overseas, she met and married Paul Gerhardt Woolley, M.D. (1905). They had two daughters. From 1910 to 1922 they lived in Cincinnati, Ohio, where Helen accepted a series of relatively low-level positions and was extremely active in civic and political affairs, primarily as an advocate on behalf of children.

Woolley contributed articles to psychological journals regularly, even while engaged in rearing her daughters. Two articles were reviews of literature on gender differences (Woolley, 1910, and Woolley, 1914), which reflected her antagonism with theories of mythical differences and her optimism that scientific investigation would prove them untrue. In 1922 Woolley joined the staff of the Merrill-Palmer School, where she and her colleague Helen Cleveland developed the famous Merrill-Palmer Scales based upon Maria Montessori's "apparatus."

In 1924 her world "collapsed" when Paul left her for a younger woman. From 1926 to 1930 she held the position of professor of education and Director of the Institute of Child Development at Teachers College of Columbia University, but was not able to fulfill her teaching obligations and was finally asked to resign (Zapoleon and Meek, 1974).

In 1903, Helen Thompson's dissertational results were published in Mental Traits of Sex. She was interested, for example, in testing the hypothesis that women were more susceptible to "intense fatigue" than men and would grow less efficient. She found no differences between the 25 men and 25 women subjects in her study. She found, more significantly, that women were "distinctly better" for both visual and auditory material than men (1903)

Woolley's review of literature - from material obtained by her through the University of Cincinnati via a primitive inter-library loan - is a reasonably careful and complete one, her "tentative generalizations" from the data being somewhat of a contribution to the field themselves. Interestingly she includes none of her studies, but is kindly disposed toward and impressed by Leta Hollingworth and her work on the "variability hypothesis." (1914, pp 371-372).

Woolley was, of course, an experimentalist and psychometrician first and foremost and her review involves a competent critique of the research in terms of methodology. She, like Hollingworth, was clearly an environmentalist, who looked for causes of observed differences in social realities. To give a flavor of Woolley's style:

> The tentative generalizations which may be drawn from this series of facts are (1) that girls develop faster than boys from infancy; (2) that boys are superior to girls in rapidity of movement in types of activity in which the direction of attention remains fixed, as in reaction time and

> tapping; and (3) that girls are superior to boys in rapidity of motion in types of activity in which the direction of attention is constantly shifting ...such as card sorting, mirror drawing, reading, and writing" (1914, p. 356)

or

> On the whole, then, girls have stood better than boys in measures of general intelligence. So far as I know, no one has drawn the conclusion that girls have greater native ability than boys. One is tempted to indulge in idle speculation as to whether this admirable restraint from hasty generalization would have been equally marked had the sex findings been reversed! (1914, p. 365)

Woolley described several specific differences between the genders, explained them as probably due to differences in socialization, and concluded unequivocally that in no way does the published research suggest the innate superiority of men (Woolley, 1914)

Leta Stetter Hollingworth

> The tradition emanating from the mystic and romantic novelists that woman is a mysterious being, half hysteric, half angel, has found its way into scientific writing. (1914, p 95).
>
> ...Extremely stupid girls thus survive, and presumably reproduce their kind, more easily than do extremely stupid boys. The social order is such that survival of the former depends less upon intelligence than it does for the latter (1922, p.57).
>
> ...if our social habit and organization ever changes so that sex as such is no longer of commercial and economic value to women, and so that women become mentally competitive to the same extent as men, the number of females in institutions for the feeble-minded will be naturally increased.(1913, p. 756)

Leta Stetter Hollingworth

Leta Hollingworth, who maintained that her family motto was "I love to test" (Hollingworth, 1943), is best known for research on intelligence, especially her work on gifted children, and her important books on the psychology of adolescence and on learning disorders. There has been a revival of interest in her life and work in recent years, particularly among feminists (Stevens and Gardner, 1981).

A product of the Nebraska plains, she was actually born in a mud hut on the prairie and attended school in a one-room, log schoolhouse (which she termed "excellent in every respect.") Her mother died when she was three and her father was a ne'er-do-well, so she had to overcome a childhood filled with poverty and emotional deprivation (Hollingworth, 1943). On New Year's Eve, 1908, Leta married Hary Levy Hollingworth, her college sweetheart, who was also to become a distinguished psychologist and a professor at Columbia.

After five frustrating years as a New York housewife, during which Leta "stifled her own eager longing for intellectual activity like that of her husband" (Hollingworth, 1943, p. 98), she metriculated at Columbia and began a brilliant, multifaceted career that was to prove to be tragically brief as well. The first civil service psychologist in New York State, she began a long and innovative affiliation with Bellevue, beginning in 1916, the year she obtained her Ph.D. from Columbia and accepted a full-time

position at Columbia in the Department of Education.

A staunch feminist since her college days, Leta Hollingworth was an advocate and activist in professional and social issues, established a reputation as a mental tester, a very productive researcher, a prolific writer, who was the author of the classic textbook on the psychology of adolescents, and one of the brilliant and powerful psychologists to make Columbia University America's most important training institution in psychology (Stevens and Gardner, 1981).

Leta Hollingworth published twelve articles on the psychology of women and was working on a definitive book on feminism at the time of her death. Like Woolley, Hollingworth maintained utter confidence in science and her work on gender differences was characterized by objectivity and experimental control (Shields, 1975b).

Her best known research was on the "variability hypothesis." Before Darwin, it was widely held that men are more consistent than women and thus superior. After the noted evolutionist theorist suggested that variability in ability was more important for species survival, the theory became prevalent that men are actually more variable than women (Shields, 1975a). Hollingworth studied the incidence of mental deficiency by gender, controlling for age, which she postulated would influence the time at which the impairment was recognized. She reported no evidence

to support the variability hypothesis (Hollingworth, 1913).

Hollingworth then studied incidence of amentia in neonates, in order to control for socialization effects. She and Helen Montague measured the ability of 1000 consecutively born neonate boys and 100 neomate girls and again found no differences between genders (Montague and Hollingworth, 1914).

Hollingworth's conclusions concerning incidence rates for amentia reveal her consistent interest in social reality; more than a "common-sense sociology" her explanations were related to empirical results, as well as her informal experiences and her own life. She noted, for example, that females are not as likely to be identified as defective as men because the tasks required of women, housework and child-rearing, are too low-level to allow genius or amentia to become manifested. Shields suggests that this will result in women being recognized later as defective "when they had become too old to be 'useful' or self-supporting" (Shilds, 1975b, p. 854).

Leta Hollingworth's "feminist" research, thus, extended to many aspects of the female social role and challenged, at least in a polemical, various myths concerning women. She clearly comprehended the low status of women in this society and the non-scientific fictions which perpetuate it (Hollingworth, 1913, 1922; Montague and Hollingworth, 1914).

For her dissertational research, Hollingworth tested another myth concerning women, the "menstruation hypothesis." Everyone "knows" that women perform poorly just before and during menstruation. She compared the ability of men and women on various motor and intellectual tasks at different times of the month. After three months of testing, Hollingworth concluded that there were no differences between men and women on any of the tests at any time of the month (Hollingworth, 1914).

Conclusion

Carefully controlled research on cultural myths surrounding women was, thus, undertaken when our grandmothers were little girls. That men are intellectually superior, more variable in ability, more practical, more creatively productive, and more competent were effectively dispelled before the end of the First World War. The early feminist psychologists, such as Hollingworth and Woolley, presented evidence that women are not innately inferior, not made hopelessly inefficient by menstruation, not possessed of inadeuate neural equipment.

Continuing the tradition established by Woolley and Hollingworth, almost all of the women of psychology, have at one time or another, tested a myth or reevaluated research data concerning women. Their conclusions were also the same, i.e., no differences between women and men that could not best be explained in terms of socialization experiences

or societal expectations. In light of the data available, the persisting "assumption of an innate emotional, sexless, unimaginative female character" (Shields, 1975a p. 753), the longevity of the disputed myths about the nature of women, must be seen as a social and historic anomaly.

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